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Next 3 Page(s) In Document Denied

Some Features of Preparing and Conducting a Front Offensive Operation, Beginning Without the Employment of Nuclear Weapons, in Mountainous and Desert Terrain

(Based on the experience of exercises in the Turkestan Military District)

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A front offensive operation in mountainous and desert terrain may begin with the use of conventional means of combat. Such an operation will have its own specific features.

Based on the experience of command-staff exercises and war games conducted in our military district, the following average data characterize the scope of a front offensive operation under the conditions examined: the width of the front offensive zone reached 700 to 800 and sometimes 1,000 kilometers or more; the depth of the operation reached 650 to 850 kilometers, with the depth of the immediate task of the front -- 250 to 350 kilometers, and that of the subsequent task -- 400 to 500 kilometers. The immediate task included breaking through the enemy defense in mountain passes, destroying his main grouping, negotiating the first mountain line, moving into the valley and seizing other accessible areas and installations supporting the commitment to the engagement of the second echelon (reserves) of the front for the purpose of developing the offensive to the entire depth of the operation. The subsequent task included destroying the enemy operational reserves and seizing those important operational-strategic areas and installations by whose capture the goal of the operation is achieved and conditions favorable to the conduct of the next operation are established.

The rate of advance of troops in mountainous and desert terrain depends to a considerable degree on climatic conditions. In springtime, the most favorable period, the troops can cover up to 30 kilometers per day in the mountains and up to 60 to 70 kilometers per day in the desert. The rate of advance will be lower during the time of year when it is hot, owing to the high air temperature and the increased shifting of the sand, and also

during the period of rains, when the flat, clayey plains sectors (salt marshes) are flooded and become difficult or impossible to negotiate. When it is hot, the air temperature in tanks and other combat vehicles climbs as high as 50 to 60 degrees, and consequently the driver-mechanics and drivers tire quickly and sometimes suffer heat stroke.

The decision of the commander of the front for the operation under consideration would also have its own specific features. First, to allow for the conduct of subsequent actions employing nuclear weapons, it is desirable that the axis of the main attack be defined to the entire depth of the operation, since maneuvering of the forces and means along the front is complex, and in many cases simply impossible. It is permissible to partially alter this axis if the enemy in the operational depth attempts to deliver a counterattack on a new axis against the main grouping of attacking front troops. Second, the main attack of the front in an offensive in mountains that are difficult to negotiate will often be delivered on the axis that is most accessible to troop actions, which coincides with the mountain passes where the enemy, as a rule, establishes a strong defense. As a result, troop combat actions will be severely hampered by the small capacity of these passes.

In a situation of this specific character, the commander will be forced to set up several groupings, including some on relatively accessible axes that are a great distance from each other. Each should be capable of conducting independent combat actions to the entire depth of the operation, for it is very difficult to provide help. However, even under these conditions the main forces and means are concentrated on the axis of the main attack, and a substantial superiority is established over the enemy in manpower and fire means, especially in artillery, tanks, and aviation. The number of offensive groupings may change during the operation. Thus, after having negotiated mountains that are difficult to traverse and reached spacious valleys, individual groupings may be combined into a single, stronger grouping.

50X1-HUM

Because of the limited capacity of the operational axes and the relatively low operational density of the enemy troops in mountainous and desert terrain, the offensive groupings will be of lower strength than those in ordinary theaters of military

operations. The main grouping of front troops may include up to two army corps (taking into account the commitment to the engagement of the second-echelon corps), composed of four to five motorized rifle and tank divisions, an airborne division, an artillery breakthrough division, one or two tank-destroyer brigades, a missile brigade, and large units and units of engineer, chemical, and other special troops. The strength of the other groupings may fluctuate from that of a reinforced division to that of an army corps.

If the main efforts of the enemy are concentrated in the tactical depth, the main forces of the front should be in the first echelon. If, however, the main forces of the enemy are located in the operational depth, the bulk of the forces and means of the front should be placed in the second echelon or in the reserve.

A single operational plan is formulated for troop actions which employ nuclear weapons and those which do not. It is essential that the plan also provide for measures related to the seizure and negotiation of mountain passes and gaps, especially on the axis of the main attack of the front; the capture of oases; the support of independent troop actions by axes; the control of detached troop groupings; and measures during the transition to actions employing nuclear weapons.

When combat actions are conducted in which nuclear weapons are not employed, the main burden in carrying out fire tasks falls on the artillery, aviation, and tanks. Under these conditions the authorized strength of the artillery will be inadequate to carry out its extremely diverse tasks. Up to 12 artillery battalions must be attached to each army corps, and approximately 13 battalions from the reserve of the Supreme High Command must be placed directly under the command of the front. If when the operation begins only organic means are available, then to ensure a sufficient density of fire in the breakthrough sectors, it is desirable, in our opinion, to allocate second-echelon artillery and tanks to conduct fire from indirect fire positions and by direct aiming during the period of preparatory fire. 50X1-HUM

Experience shows that in contrast to normal conditions, during actions in mountainous and desert terrain, corps artillery

groups, as a rule, are not formed; divisional artillery groups may be organized on the axes where the centralized use of the artillery is feasible, and during actions of the main forces of a division in narrow sectors. It is desirable that the divisions operating on the main axes have artillery antitank reserves.

Front aviation has a special role in the destruction of enemy installations in a mountainous theater. Estimates show that a front air army, in order to carry out the tasks assigned to it, must have a minimum of one or two fighter air divisions, a fighter-bomber air division, and one or two bomber air regiments. It is recommended that an aviation grouping be formed on the axis of the main attack of the front and on the axes of the actions of army corps engaged in important independent tasks.

Based on the experience of exercises and war games, a front offensive operation may begin suddenly with an attack by the troops in constant combat readiness and the simultaneous full mobilization and deployment of the remaining forces. Under these conditions, the large units in constant readiness move directly from their permanent deployment points to the line of commitment to battle, bypassing the alert concentration areas, and go over to the offensive from the march. Since the troops are at varying distances from the state border, they may go over to the offensive at different times.

When there is a period of threat, the large units in constant readiness move out to the alternate alert areas, and are brought up to full strength, and the remaining large units complete their mobilization in assigned areas; then the front troops deploy and go over to the offensive simultaneously.

The attack should always be preceded by the delivery of powerful air and artillery strikes against the manpower and fire means of the enemy situated at the forward edge and in the immediate tactical depth, and against the most important targets and installations in the operational depth. The first fire strike ensures the effective neutralization or destruction of the enemy on the approaches to the mountain passes and gaps and, above all, the destruction of the demolition teams and their control posts so as to preclude the destruction of the mountain passes.

The success of the initial stage of the operation will hinge on the swift capture of the mountain passes by the flanking and forward detachments and the airborne landing forces, which generally consist of from a reinforced company up to a reinforced battalion or regiment, and also on the overall negotiation of the mountain passes by the first-echelon large units. It is desirable to have tank large units in the second echelon of the army corps and to commit them to the engagement for the purpose of developing the offensive after the mountain passes have been negotiated.

If the situation changes abruptly during the operation, it may be necessary to shift the main efforts of the front to a new operational axis. This will occur most frequently in two instances. First, when the enemy on the axis of the main attack of the front has set up an extremely strong defense in the operational depth on mountain lines that are difficult to traverse, has concentrated large forces and carried out extensive demolition work, and the front does not have sufficient forces and means at its disposal to negotiate this defense. Continuation of the offensive would in this case result in great losses, a sharp decrease in the rates of advance, and possibly, the disruption of the operation as well. Second, when the goal is to eliminate the danger of an enemy counterattack on the flank and rear of the main grouping of the front troops.

The regrouping of the main forces of the front to a new axis while an operation in mountainous and desert terrain is in progress will also have several specific features. It may be accomplished over greater than normal distances, from several hundred up to 1,000 kilometers or more. For example, the regrouping of the main forces of a front during the command-staff war game in April 1965 was planned for a distance of 450 to 1,000 kilometers.

The regrouping of troops will have to be accomplished when road networks are poorly developed and in the almost total absence of railroads, sources of water, and water reserves. The maximum rate of march, as has been shown by the experience of exercises, may be 150 to 180 kilometers per day. A division will be assigned one to two routes, and occasionally several large 50X1-HUM units will use the same route. It will be extremely difficult to negotiate the massive demolition work carried out by the enemy in

mountain passes, ravines, and canyons. Strong movement support detachments will have to be sent out in advance.

The regrouping should be planned while the operation is being prepared, and only in case of emergency while the operation is in progress. In addition to the usual matters, the plan specifies measures suitable to mountainous and desert terrain to be taken when taking the troops out of action, restoring their combat effectiveness, concealing a regrouping, and preparing for a long march.

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